

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 12 September 2022

Public Authority: The British Broadcasting Corporation
(‘the BBC’)

Address: 2252 White City
201 Wood Lane
London
W12 7TS

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested information about text accompanying an iPlayer programme listing. The BBC explained the information was covered by the derogation and excluded from FOIA.
2. The Commissioner’s decision is that this information was held by the BBC for the purposes of ‘journalism, art or literature’ and did not fall inside FOIA. He therefore upholds the BBC’s position and requires no remedial steps to be taken in this case.

Request and response

3. On 9 June 2022 the complainant submitted a request for information to the BBC in the following terms:

“I would be grateful if your would provide me with information relating to the several changes that were made to the text within the online image used for the iPlayer listing of the BBC 1 Panorama Episode “China’s Coronavirus Cover-up”. In particular information as to why the BBC considered it necessary to do so. These changes were made several times since the Episode was first broadcast on the 27th July 2020 at 19:30....

... Please make available to me all of the information relating to the alterations to the iPlayer image text post creation of the Episode and its broadcast on the 27th July 2020.”

4. The BBC responded on 22 June 2022. It explained that it believes that the information requested is excluded from FOIA because it is held for the purposes of ‘journalism, art or literature.’ It explained that Part VI of Schedule 1 to FOIA provides that information held by the BBC and the other public service broadcasters is only covered by FOIA if it is held for ‘purposes other than those of journalism, art or literature’. It concluded that the BBC was not required to supply information held for the purposes of creating the BBC’s output or information that supports and is closely associated with these creative activities. It therefore would not provide any information in response to the request for information.

Scope of the case

5. The complainant contacted the Commissioner to complain about the way their request for information had been handled. In particular, they challenged the operation of the derogation in this case.
6. The complainant did not accept the Commissioner’s assessment that the information they had requested was not covered by FOIA and preferred to conclude their complaint through a formal decision notice.

Reasons for decision

7. Schedule One, Part VI of FOIA provides that the BBC is a public authority for the purposes of FOIA but only has to deal with requests for information in some circumstances. The entry relating to the BBC states:

“The British Broadcasting Corporation, in respect of information held for purposes other than those of journalism, art or literature.”
8. This means that the BBC has no obligation to comply with part I to V of the Act where information is held for ‘purposes of journalism, art or literature’. The Commissioner calls this situation ‘the derogation’.
9. The House of Lords in *Sugar v BBC* [2009] UKHL 9 confirmed that the Commissioner has the jurisdiction to issue a decision notice to confirm whether or not the information is caught by the derogation. The Commissioner’s analysis will now focus on the derogation.

10. The scope of the derogation was considered by the Court of Appeal in the case *Sugar v British Broadcasting Corporation and another* [2010] EWCA Civ 715, and later, on appeal, by the Supreme Court (*Sugar (Deceased) v British Broadcasting Corporation* [2012] UKSC 4). The leading judgment in the Court of Appeal case was made by Lord Neuberger of Abbotsbury MR who stated that:

“ once it is established that the information sought is held by the BBC for the purposes of journalism, it is effectively exempt from production under FOIA, even if the information is also held by the BBC for other purposes.” (paragraph 44), and that “....provided there is a genuine journalistic purpose for which the information is held, it should not be subject to FOIA.” (paragraph 46)

11. The Supreme Court endorsed this approach in *Sugar (Deceased) v British Broadcasting Corporation and another* [2012] UKSC 4¹ and concluded that if the information is held for the purpose of journalism, art or literature, it is caught by the derogation even if that is not the predominant purpose for holding the information in question.
12. In order to establish whether the information is held for a derogated purpose, the Supreme Court indicated that there should be a sufficiently direct link between at least one of the purposes for which the BBC holds the information (ignoring any negligible purposes) and the fulfilment of one of the derogated purposes. This is the test that the Commissioner will apply.
13. If a sufficiently direct link is established between the purposes for which the BBC holds the information and any of the three derogated purposes – i.e. journalism, art or literature – it is not subject to FOIA.
14. The Supreme Court said that the Information Tribunal’s definition of journalism (in *Sugar v Information Commissioner* (EA/2005/0032, 29 August 2006)) as comprising three elements, continues to be authoritative

“1. The first is the collecting or gathering, writing and verifying of materials for publication.

2. The second is editorial. This involves the exercise of judgement on issues such as:

* the selection, prioritisation and timing of matters for broadcast or

¹ <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2010-0145-judgment.pdf>

publication,

- * the analysis of, and review of individual programmes,
- * the provision of context and background to such programmes.

3. The third element is the maintenance and enhancement of the standards and quality of journalism (particularly with respect to accuracy, balance and completeness). This may involve the training and development of individual journalists, the mentoring of less experienced journalists by more experienced colleagues, professional supervision and guidance, and reviews of the standards and quality of particular areas of programme making."

However, the Supreme Court said this definition should be extended to include the act of broadcasting or publishing the relevant material. This extended definition should be adopted when applying the 'direct link test'.

15. The Supreme Court also explained that "journalism" primarily means the BBC's "output on news and current affairs", including sport, and that "journalism, art or literature" covers the whole of the BBC's output to the public (Lord Walker at paragraph 70). Therefore, in order for the information to be derogated and so fall outside FOIA, there should be a sufficiently direct link between the purpose(s) for which the information is held and the production of the BBC's output and/or the BBC's journalistic or creative activities involved in producing such output.
16. The Commissioner adopts a similar definition for the other elements of the derogation, in that the information must be used in the production, editorial management and maintenance of standards of those art forms.
17. The information that has been requested in this case concerns the BBC's iPlayer and changes that were made to how a specific programme was described on the iPlayer.
18. In determining whether the information is held for the purposes of journalism, the Commissioner has considered the following factors:
 - The purpose(s) for which the information was held at the time of the request;
 - The relationship between the purposes for which the information was held and the BBC's output on news and current affairs, including sport, and/or its journalistic activities relating to such output.

19. In their complaint to the Commissioner the complainant has discussed their concerns about the BBC's response at length. These concerns can be summarised as the following:
- Changing the description of a programme after it has been created and broadcast means that related information can no longer be derogated.
 - The BBC changed the iPlayer description to "correct a discrepancy" between how the programme was described and the actual content of the programme.
 - These changes cannot have been for the purposes of 'art, journalism or literature'.
20. However, the Commissioner is satisfied that the information that has been requested in this case relates to a particular programme. The request is therefore directly related to the output of the BBC in terms of editorial decisions about what textual information about that programme would accompany its listing on the iPlayer to inform potential viewers.
21. The Commissioner has considered the complainant's reasoning but for the reasons above, he is satisfied that the information requested is derogated because it concerns editorial decisions about the BBC's output. Therefore, the Commissioner has found that the request is for information held for the purposes of journalism and that the BBC was not obliged to comply with Parts I to V of FOIA.

Right of appeal

19. Either party has the right to appeal against this decision notice to the First-Tier Tribunal (Information Rights). Information about the appeals process may be obtained from:

First-Tier Tribunal (Information Rights)
GRC & GRP Tribunals,
PO Box 9300,
LEICESTER,
LE1 8DJ

Tel: 0203 936 8963

Fax: 0870 739 5836

Email: grc@justice.gov.uk

Website: www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber

20. If you wish to appeal against a Decision Notice, you can obtain information on how to appeal along with the relevant forms from the Information Tribunal website.
21. Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 (calendar) days of the date on which this Decision Notice is sent.

Signed

Cressida Woodall
Senior Case Officer
Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
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SK9 5AF